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Long distance trade, runes and silver: a Gotlandic perspective

Introduction

The importance of trade on Gotland is shown in the encyclopedia *De proprietatibus rerum*, written by the Franciscan friar Bartolomaeus Anglicus in the middle of the 13th century. In his chapter on geography, Anglicus describes the various characteristics of several regions and places, which would have been common knowledge to a medieval scholar at his time. Gotland is not only referred to as the home of the ancient Gothic tribes, but also as a fertile island with access to pasture, fish and many kinds of merchandise. Goods like furs, combs and other resources were being brought to the island by ship (Widmaier & Diekman 2016). Anglicus' entry is an interesting source because it provides a detailed and contemporary account of an island society dedicated to trade and commerce.

Trade and exchange relations with the outer world were also crucial for Gotlandic society during earlier periods. Visible and tangible testimonies to the global connections of the islanders can be found in Gotland's Viking Age silver hoards. More than 750 hoards, containing some 179,900 silver coins, have been found on the island. No other region of the Viking world has yielded so many coin- and silver-finds from the period. The numismatic record shows that the island's community obtained silver coins from different parts of the known world. We know today that the hoarding record stretches continuously throughout the Viking Age, from c. 800 through to 1150, a period of some 350 years (Jonsson 2017). The numismatic components not only provide information on the geography and directions of the Gotlanders' long distance contacts during this period, but the presence of the hoards themselves conveys a sense of continuity in these engagements.

Several topics and questions have been suggested by the organisers of this workshop to approach the social development of island societies in the Baltic Sea. Were places like Gotland insular backwaters, or were

they driving important processes of social and economic development? In what ways were islands nodes of communication and interaction? How can we approach innovation and preservation of knowledge, technology through the study of material sources? In this paper, I am going to address these questions in the context of the Viking expansion and interaction which is an overarching theme in this book.

Some highly inspiring talks presented by my colleagues at the workshop have addressed how the discussion of runes can provide opportunities to approach the mentalities and different identities of island societies. As argued by Laila Kitzler Åhfeldt in this volume a contextual approach towards runes is key to understanding their social significance, the circumstances in which they were used, and by whom. Magnus Källström talked about runic writing systems and the relationship between runic scripture and literacy. My own field of expertise is the use of silver, coinage, and the development of trade and exchange during the Viking and Middle Ages. One basic feature of the Viking world is the development of long-distance trading networks and commodity exchange. In the following I will argue that Viking trading networks were intellectually stimulating environments pooling together knowledge and ideas from different places. Through the application of a network perspective, I will also claim that runes and silver had many things in common. Some of the following observations, which are based on the runological and numismatic evidence, might provide new insights into the complexity of Gotland's social organisation as a seafaring nation, in addition to clues attesting to the endurance of its networks.

Runestones and travellers

Runic inscriptions represent an important source of information on aspects of Gotland's long distance trading networks. Some runestones, such as the famous Pilgårds stone from north-eastern Gotland, provide direct evidence for the people who were participating in these expeditions (Fig. 1). The original location of the runestone is not known, but it was probably situated not far from a Viking Age harbour in Boge bay. Pilgårds is dated to the 9th or 10th century (Källström 2012). The inscription mentions an unsuccessful expedition into the interior of Russia, which tragically ended near the rapids of Aifur on the Dnepr River. The inscription says:

Brightly painted, this stone was raised by Hegbjarn and his brothers Rodvisl, Austain and Emund. They have raised stones in memory of Ravn south of Rufstain. They penetrated far into the Aifur. Vivil was in command (Westholm 2009:128)

Beside the Pilgårds stone there is another traveller's stone from the church of Sjonhem, which is situated in the middle of the island. The Sjonhem runestone, which is dated to the late Viking Age, also mentions the name of several people who were engaged in long distance journeys. Even this journey had a fatal outcome:

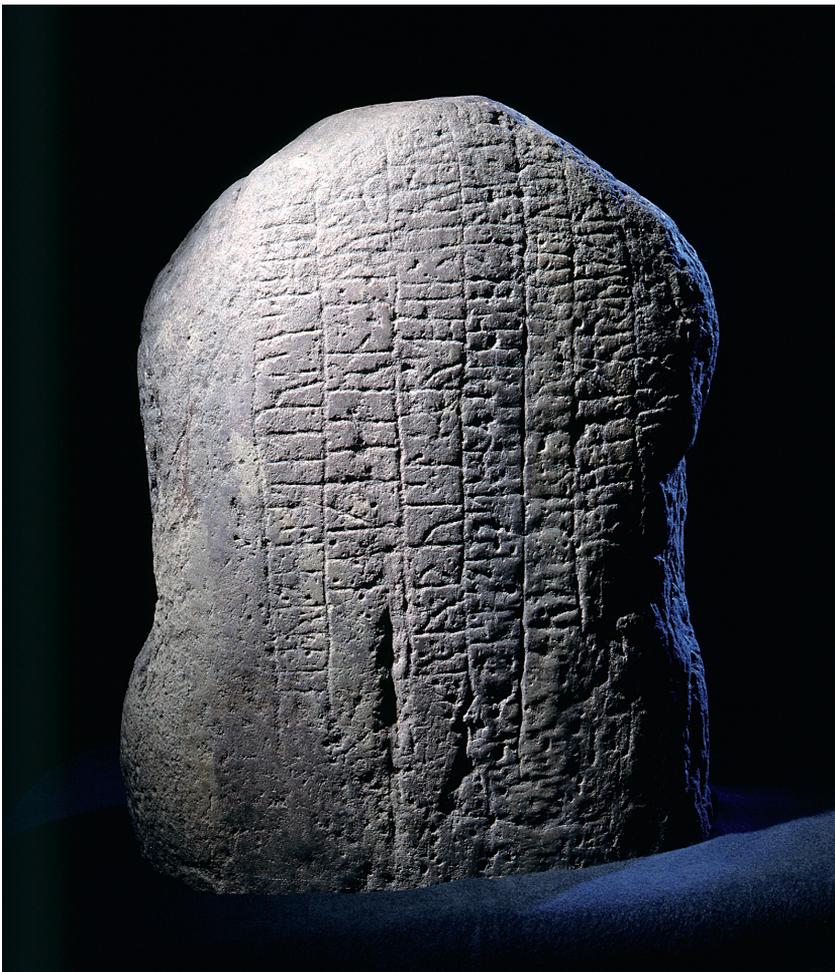


Fig. 1. The Pilgårds stone (Gotland Museum, Id GFFS005O820_1).
Photo: Raymond Hejdström, © Gotland Museum.

Rodvisl and Rodälv had these stones raised in memory of their three sons. This stone is in memory of Rodfos. He was betrayed by the Wal-lachians on an outward journey. God help Rodfos' soul. May God betray those who betrayed him (Westholm 2009:128).

In both instances, the stones commemorate the fate of brothers or sons who died on their travels abroad. On the Pilgärds stone six male persons of the expedition are mentioned, out of which four were addressed as brothers. The authors of the Sjonhem monument are parents who lament the death of their three sons. As contemporary sources the runestones allow us to get glimpses of the organisation of long-distance enterprises. As argued by Raffield in this volume, one feature of island societies is the formation of collective identities through in-group identification and its maintenance through intra-group interaction (see also Raffield et al. 2015). Considering this perspective, the brothers mentioned on the Pilgärds stone might not necessarily be relatives in a biological sense, but they might have rather considered themselves as brothers, companions, or fellows engaging in common enterprises abroad. Maybe these fellowships were the basic elements of the networks operating from Gotland, recruiting male members of big families originating from different farms on the island (Kilger in print).

Runic script and networks

Another interesting source which provides clues into the organisational aspects of trade are the runic inscriptions themselves. The evidence is based on conventions of writing runic letters, which might be termed as different orthographic traditions or writing systems. In the early 8th century the younger futhark system emerged in Scandinavia, however it is not known where it was originally designed or by whom (Källström 2014:108). Right from the beginning two variants emerged within this later system, each of which shows a distinct regional distribution pattern. The so-called long-branch runes are mainly found in Denmark, whereas the short-twig runes have their main distribution in Sweden and Norway. The town of Birka for example, is a prominent find spot for small objects with short-twig runes (Källström 2014:109-112).

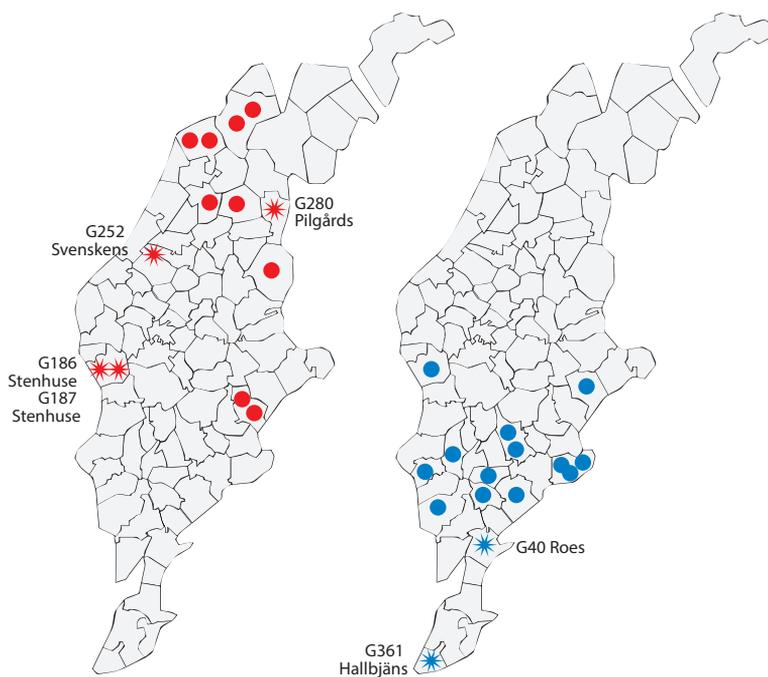


Fig. 2. Distribution pattern of picture stones with short-twig runes (red) and long-branch runes (blue). After Källström 2012:121.

Interestingly, both writing systems are present on Gotland. Many of them are found on picture stones, but also on runic monuments which lack the typical figural elements of the picture stones. Most of these date from the late Viking Age and bear a resemblance to rune stones from Uppland (Källström 2012:120). Some extraordinary inscriptions such as the Pilgårds stone are only epigraphic, which means they have no ornamentation at all. Picture stones have been found over the whole island but the ones with short-twig runes have a pronounced northern distribution, whereas the ones with long-branch runes are found on picture stones and later runic monuments on southern Gotland (Fig. 2). On Gotland, all inscriptions using the short-twig rune system should be dated before 1000, whereas most of the inscriptions with long-branch runes probably belong to the 11th century (Källström 2012:121-

2). There are, however, exceptions to this chronological pattern. Two inscriptions with long-branch runes are early and dated to the 8th century: one of these is found on an amulet from a female burial in Hallbjäns in Sundre, and the other is a short inscription on a runestone from Grötlingbo Roes (Källström 2012:121). The distinct regional and chronological distribution pattern might also be interesting to discuss in the context of travelling and trading.

From a numismatic perspective, the period when short-twig runic inscriptions were used on Gotland corresponds roughly with the period of the eastern imports of silver from the Islamic world, which started in the early 9th century and lasted into the mid-10th century (Adamczyk 2014; Kilger 2008). At the end of the 10th century the silver flows changed direction, and coins from Western Europe were entering Gotland. As mentioned earlier, the long-branch runes are mainly found in Denmark. The shift to the use of long-branch runes on the picture stones and other runic monuments in southern Gotland may relate to this geographical change in trade relations and the establishment of more regular contacts with southern Scandinavia during the Late Viking Age. Western coins such as German Pfennige and English pennies were probably acquired by Gotlandic traders at harbours in the Danish area. One potential destination for Gotlandic traders was the town of Hedeby (Hillberg 2016). The numismatic evidence suggests that travelling continued further west, to the shores of the German empire, to landing places along the coastline in Northern Germany, and to towns in the Rhine estuary (Jonsson 1990; von Heijne 2004:136).

Could the presence of two different writing conventions on Gotland be explained by trade? One probable answer might be that runes and trade, silver and exchange are mutually related. The handling of silver, and the writing and reading of runes, could be characterised as common professional practices performed by a group of specialists. Communities of traders and artisans were not only sustained through social bonds but also through learning and the transfer of knowledge. The earliest inscriptions of the younger futhark have been found in Ribe, which developed as a commercial gateway linking and combining North Sea and Scandinavian exchange systems during the 8th century (Ashby, Coutou & Sindbaek 2015). Urban places like Ribe were vibrant

and dynamic social environments, and they might have provided ideal conditions not only for the transformation of the runic alphabet but also for its use among a community of specialists engaged in long distance trade and handicraft production.

The presence of both runic variants on Gotland may be explained because of the presence of different networks operating from the island. Sharing information and conveying messages over large distances, such as information about conditions on distant destinations or information about deliverances of commodities, would have been essential to the operation of trading networks. Much of the information flow within these networks was certainly transmitted through oral communication, but in some instances runic inscriptions were a logical means of conveying short messages or notes, a mnemonic device for different purposes. For example, owner-labels on small wooden pins with runic inscriptions have been found in the medieval town of Trondheim. Owner-labels, the earliest examples of which are dated to the 11th century, were used to signify ownership to goods (Christophersen 1998:28–34). Several runic inscriptions, most of them short-twig inscriptions, have also been found on a variety of small objects from Birka, indicating the runes were used on a daily basis and on different occasions among the urban population (Källström 2014:111–2). In any case, the appearance of the younger futhark system in early Viking urban environments such as Ribe and Birka may reflect the need for different modes of communication.

However, so far there is little evidence for the use of runes relating to commercial activities on Gotland during the Viking Age. So far, there is evidence of runes on a variety of small objects such as whetstones and brooches. As suggested by Laila Kitzler Åhfeldt in this volume some of the so-called runic whetstones might instead have been used as touchstones for handling and crafting precious metals. If writing runes was much more common in the Viking Age on Gotland this should be more traceable through the archaeological record. Based on the testimony of later sources, we know that people on Gotland in the Middle Ages were probably literate to a lesser or greater extent. According to the Guta Law, which dates from the mid 13th century the Gotlanders used wooden tablets to reckon and prove genealogies. Such tablets were probably common on Gotland but none has survived (Peel

2009:29f, 122). Interestingly the runic inscriptions on small objects from Birka have been carved on bone, antler, metals like silver and copper and whetstones. None were made of wood (Källström 2014:110-111). The absence of inscriptions on wooden objects might have a source critical explanation. The survival of organic materials in the archaeological record, especially in wood, is dependent on ideal preservation conditions. For instance, at Birka wooden objects and constructions have exclusively been recorded in wet and waterlogged contexts.

Finally, we have to bear in mind that hoards with dirhams and western pennies have been found all over the island. There is no direct correlation between hoards from different periods and the skewed distribution of inscriptions with either short-twig or long-branch runes. What the peculiar distribution patterns of the runic writing conventions might show is the dominance of a highly conventional use of runic letters in two different areas on the island. The rather late appearance of the long-branch runes and its marked southern distribution, especially, might indicate that people living on southern Gotland sustained contact and trade relations with the Danish areas.

Knowledge, skills and resources

The success of merchants in long distance engagements depended on their capacity to accumulate and to engage different resources and skills. One such skill was knowledge about weight systems and monetary units of account, the use of which was necessary to determine the value of commodities and silver used in exchange. Viking merchants probably had a profound knowledge of the Islamic mithqal system, which operated on a global scale within and outside the Caliphate (Kilger 2015a). Long distance travel may also have contributed to the development of certain abilities and routines crucial for exploring distant places, such as planning journeys, imagining routes and final destinations, and mapping the known world by different means (Sindbaek 2005). Fundamental in this process is the development of networks across the Viking world, which were operating almost on a global scale.

Network theory has provided new insights into long distant contacts during the Viking Age, and how these were organised and structured at varying geographical and logistical scales (Sindbaek 2007). Many aspects of how these networks operated and why they were so success-

ful remain to be explored. An important question in this context is how Viking towns and trading places interacted within these networks. Early towns such as Birka, Ribe, Åhus, Groß Strömkendorf, Truso, Grobina and Staraja Ladoga discussed elsewhere in this volume were already established in the Baltic Sea zone and adjacent regions during the 8th century. Situated along the coast and rivers, accessed from the sea by ships and crowded with people possessing different skills and ethnic affiliations, these places created arenas for social interaction. A promising field for future research would be to study how new demands and needs in these environments triggered intellectual responses and technical innovations. The development of the younger futhark and the adaption of the sail on seagoing vessels in the 8th century might be seen in this context (see also contributions by Hedenstierna-Jonson and Ljungkvist this volume).

A comparative cultural and social trajectory for the Viking expansion in the Baltic Sea is provided by the establishment of the Greek colonies and the development of trade relations in the Mediterranean Sea during the 8th and 7th centuries BC. The creation of the alphabet out of the Phoenician writing system, for example, might reflect similar social and intellectual processes in trading communities and provide a blueprint for understanding the development of the younger futhark system. The Viking and Greek diasporas had many things in common which might be an interesting field for comparison in future studies. As discussed by Gustafsson in this volume, Gotland society did not establish towns and larger harbors like those seen at Hedeby, Ribe or Birka, which could have acted as hubs for trade, commerce and long-distance engagement. Instead harbors on Gotland operated on a small-scale and were probably seasonal, at least until the 11th century when this pattern changed (as elaborated by Gustafsson, this volume). How Gotlandic trading networks operated in the absence of these trading hubs and urban environments that were so vital for sustaining long distance engagements elsewhere, however, still remains to be explored.

One key for approaching the social organisation of Gotlandic society might be to understand what silver itself meant to the Gotlanders. Who was using silver and how? Who were the pioneers of the evolving silver economy and why did it start? In considering silver from an

economic and a monetary perspective, I would like to argue that silver also was a resource that enabled individuals with different skills in a society to work together and to cooperate. It also enabled the value of completely different objects to be compared and agreed upon, and by means of monetary abstraction to translate quality and quantity into a common scale. In my opinion, Gotlandic society became monetised to a certain extent when silver arrived in larger quantities on the island during the 9th century. As part of this process weighed silver developed into an asset and acquired monetary power. As I have argued elsewhere (Kilger in print), the many hoards on the island might indicate the formalisation of various transactions and contracts between different families. Many hoards, for example, might represent dowries, providing the bride with security when marrying into another family on the island. As “contract-silver”, hoards not only balanced the delicate issue of claims to inheritance within and between families, but they also functioned as a means of building up alliances of knowledge between different groups on the island. It probably was silver that nourished the social complexity of Gotlandic society and enabled it to sustain its networks.

Entrepreneurs and professionals

In this final section, I will present some material evidence on the organisation of trade. One way to explore the wide palette of different skills and knowledge within the networks of Gotlandic traders is through the analysis of the silver hoards themselves. In his discussion on the Pilgård stone, its origins and the intellectual environment behind the inscription, Magnus Källström suggests that north-eastern Gotland and especially the area of Bogevisken could have been a center for the use of runic inscriptions during the early Viking period (Källström 2012:127). His suggestion might also be supported through the study of early Viking Age hoards. The area round Bogevisken, especially, is one of the most prolific localities for hoarding on north-eastern Gotland, and was home to the huge hoards discovered on the farm of Spillings – the largest ever discovered on the island (Fig. 3).

The Spillings hoards provide information on the trading environment that once existed in the Bogevisken area (for a presentation of the hoard, its historical and archaeological context, see Pettersson 2009).



Fig. 3. One of the two Spillings silver hoards discovered in 1999 (Gotland Museum Id SPSK_003). Photo: Göran Ström, © Gotland Museum.

Both hoards contain a mixture of different ring types and bracelets which usually are not present on Gotland. Spiral-striated neckrings, ring money and broadband armrings of Hiberno-Norse type have their main distribution area in Southern Scandinavia, Scotland and Ireland (Thunmark-Nylén 2006:701ff). There are also fragments of ribbon-shaped mounts of probable Anglo-Saxon origin (Östergren 2009). From a craftsmen's perspective, it is interesting to note that the Spillings hoards contained about 250 specimens of the domestic Gotlandic horseshoe shaped bangles (Sw. *armbyglar*), which is also the earliest datable evidence. The uniformity in weight, shape and ornamentation of these objects might indicate their significance as currency in Gotlandic society (Kilger 2015b:38, tab. 1). Finally, both hoards contain an excep-

tionally large sum of fragmented dirhams. Out of 14 300 dirhams, 88 % were fragmented and weighed on average less than 1.5 grams. Hoards with such a concentration of minted small-size hack silver haven't been recorded, neither on Gotland nor elsewhere. This implies that the hack silver in both hoards was not valued piecemeal in bits and pieces but handled as a commodity in very large batches.

Big silver hoards like Spillings appear after c. 860 in Scandinavia and Russia. The significant concentration of silver in few individual finds might suggest that the handling of silver during this period was surveilled and controlled by a small number of players (Kilger 2008:240-1). The enormous amounts of hack silver in Spillings were probably not gathered on Gotland but acquired from a distant source outside Gotland. This is still a hypothetical suggestion and has to be evaluated in future studies. Another observation which might support this suggestion is that Spillings and other late 9th century hoards, many from northern Gotland, have a faint but special numismatic signature. They contain a small amount of late 9th century dirhams from Abbasid mints in the southern Caucasus which also are the terminal coins. Caucasian dirhams minted in the last quarter of the 9th century are almost absent on the Swedish mainland and other areas in Scandinavia (Kilger 2008:244-5).

This numismatic signature and the continued hoarding on Gotland during the late 9th century has to be seen in a wider global context. After c. 875, long-distance contacts from Scandinavia with Russia broke down and did not resume before the early 10th century. There are almost no silver hoards dated between ca. 875 and 900 in Scandinavia, the Baltic and beyond, which has led to a scholarly debate about the existence of a silver crisis in this period (e.g. Noonan 1985). Remarkably, Gotlandic networks were still able to acquire dirham silver somewhere in Eastern Europe when other networks failed.

When the evidence is considered collectively, I would like to argue that the owners of Spillings could be characterised as “entrepreneurs” in international trade, who acquired silver in different shapes from different sources. They were probably professionals who were able to maintain contacts over long distances, experts in managing different supply chains and skilled in handling silver in large and small units. When the numismatic and runic evidence is compared, it could be

argued that the Spillings hoards and the Pilgårds stone are related in terms of their exceptional character. That they originate from the same locality on Gotland is probably not a coincidence.

Conclusions

To conclude my short presentation, I would like to argue that hoarding represents not just material evidence for resilience within Gotlandic society. Silver hoards and their contents also demonstrate the ability of Gotlandic merchants to regroup and reorganise travels to changing destinations. They also prove the existence of a stable form of social organisation that facilitated long distance trading contact even during periods of crisis. A good example for this is the situation in the late 9th century when disaster seem to have affected the networks operating in Eastern Europe.

The evidence of two runic writing systems and their potential relation to trade may also indicate the ability of Gotlandic society to accumulate and to engage resources of different kinds. The ability to sustain specialists in writing, trading, and also other crafts also hints to the complexity of Gotlandic society during the Viking Age.

Finally, the thousands of coins buried in the hoards convey a powerful material message, an “evocative charge” of ideas, knowledge and practices once present on the island and acquired through long-distance interaction (Audy 2018:229). From a social perspective, island societies like Gotland were not backwaters, but at the forefront of trade and communication across the Viking world.

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